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UNCLAS ADDIS ABABA 000594

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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: BIRTUKAN MIDEKSSA IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

REF: 2008 ADDIS 3460

1. (SBU) Ms. Almaz Gebre-Egzabhier, mother of incarcerated opposition leader Birtukan Midekssa (reftel), informed Pol/Econ Chief on March 11 that her daughter has been held in solitary confinement at Kaliti prison since January. Birtukan's attorney was able to visit her once in January but has since been denied access. All other visitors have been refused with the exception of her 70 year old mother and four year old daughter who are allowed to visit on Saturdays and Sundays for 20-30 minutes each. Ms. Almaz confirmed that during visits, prison guards open Birtukan's cell and allow her to sit opposite her mother and daughter. Guards allow the two only to exchange greetings -- always with a prison guard present -- and have told Ms. Almaz that engaging in any substantive dialogue with her daughter would cause her to lose her visitation rights.

2. (SBU) Ms. Almaz noted that she has not been allowed into Birtukan's cell, but reported that Birtukan's daughter once ran into the cell and confirmed that it does have light, bedding, water, and a toilet. Typical of prison life, Ms. Almaz is allowed to bring her daughter food and fresh clothes during visits. She noted that Birtukan's only sibling came from the south to visit her once, but over the course of eight days he was consistently denied access to her.

3. (SBU) While Ms. Almaz asked for USG help to gain her daughter's release, at a minimum she urged the Embassy to ask for Birtukan to be released from solitary confinement and granted treatment equivalent to any other prisoner (i.e. the ability to mingle with others in a common cell, access to visitors, etc.). She specifically urged the USG to request direct access to visit Birtukan and assess her condition. Barring that, she urged that we ask for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to have access to her.

COMMENT

4. (SBU) Birtukan's solitary confinement is unwarranted just as her re-arrest is based more on political pressures against the opposition than on the breaking of any law or conditions for her release in August 2007. Ambassador has raised this numerous times with the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister during two meetings just in the past week. Embassy staff has also raised this issue aggressively with contacts. The government is firmly committed to keeping Birtukan in jail and there is strong animosity against her by the ruling party elite. Although it will be difficult to discuss her case with the government, we will continue to find openings and pursue possibilities to resolve this issue. End Comment.

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